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Religious Heritage of the Punjab

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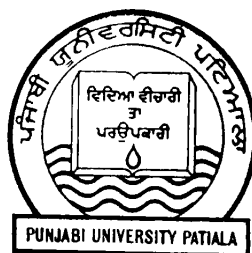
Presidential Address

by

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Mr Vice-Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen :

My first duty is to express my gratitude to the sponsors of this seminar for inviting me to deliver the inaugural address. I am fully aware of my scholastic limitations; all I can say in my defence is that I have never had any pretensions of scholarship. Furthermore, my unorthodox approach towards matters spiritual has made me suspect in the eyes of professors and preachers of religion. It needed courage to invite me and give me the opportunity once more to put across my point of view to as august an assembly as I see present here. I know most of you will not agree with what I have to say. Nevertheless I will say it in the hope that you may ponder over some of the points I make, before you decide to reject my thesis. Some, I hope, may even be persuaded to accept it.

First let me dispose of the theme of this seminar as briefly as I can, as I notice from the list of topics for discussion that it will be dealt with in detail in your sessions. Punjab has an old—perhaps the oldest and the richest—religious heritage of any State of India; I would go further, Punjab has perhaps one of the oldest and richest spiritual heritages of any country in the world : Animist, Dravidian, Aryan, Jain and Buddhist systems of belief have flourished here in different periods of our history. The Vedas were in all probability conceived and written here. So also were the two great epics of Hinduism, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, including the quintessence of the Hindu faith, the Bhagvadgita. It was in the Punjab that Islam made its real impact on the people of India. It was not, as we are often told, a conquest by the sword because conquests made by swords are short-lived. It was the triumph of a faith believing in one God and the brotherhood of man preached by men of peace, the Sufi mystics, many of whom sleep in this sacred soil. You are no doubt familiar with the names of Baba Farid Shakarganj, Hazrat Mian Mir and Data Ganj Baksh. There were innumerable others belonging to one or another of the Sufi *silsilas* who carried the message of Islam to the people of this land. Then followed our own ten Gurus who took the best from Hinduism and Islam in the

hope of creating a faith which would be acceptable to all the peoples of India. And following the Gurus came splinter movements, the Nirankari, Namdhari, Radhasoami and many others, emphasizing some aspect or other of the parent religion. It was in the Punjab that the renaissance of Hinduism through the Arya Samaj took place and found its most ardent following. It was again in the Punjab that the teachings of the Brahmo Samaj, born in Bengal, were propagated through the munificence of Sardar Dayal Singh Majithia. Even Christian missionaries found the Punjabi soil fertile ground for their activities; they sowed seeds of Christianity from their centres in Ludhiana and Batala, and won hundreds of thousands of adherents from amongst the landed aristocracy as well as from the poorest of the poor and the most discriminated sections of our society. It is significant that the biggest figure in the Indian Christianity hagiology is that of a Punjabi, Sadhu Sunder Singh of Patiala. In the Punjab, the flame of spiritualism was never allowed to die. For Sikhism it was kept alive by men like Dr Bhai Vir Singh; for Hinduism by Swami Ram Tirath and Sharddhanand; for Islam by the philosopher-poet Sir Mohammed Iqbal.

What does this multi-faceted religious tradition amount to today? Is it a feast with dishes of distinctively different tastes? Or have we been able to concoct a *khichdi*, a Punjabi *khichdi*, in which you can savour all its different ingredients? The theme I propose to put forward for your consideration is that despite the different religions to which we have in the past and today subscribed, we have also evolved a Punjabi ethos, a Punjabi value-system which, though at variance with orthodox Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism (the three main religious systems of the Punjab), if properly nurtured, could become, if not the religion, at least the commonly accepted ethical code of Punjabis both Indian and Pakistani. Its principal philosopher was Sir Mohammad Iqbal whom I regard as the prophet of the modern Punjab.

In order to make my thesis clearer, permit me to digress a little on what I regard as the principal functions of religion in our lives. All religions provide for three kinds of relationships: Man's relation to God, his creator and destroyer;

man's relationship towards his fellow men; and man's relationship to himself, his conscience. In the first relationship, religions speculate on the origin of the universe and its dissolution. In the second they prescribe rules of conduct for society. And in the third, they provide methods by which a man under stress can bring solace to himself. In the first, they try to answer questions such as "Where have I come from ? Where will I go when I die ?" In the second, they lay down rules to preserve society : Do not kill or hurt your neighbour, do not steal, lie or behave in a manner injurious to the society in which you live. In the third, religion prescribes methods by which a man can look into his inner self and bring peace to his tortured mind.

All religions, as I have said, provided for these three relationships at one time. They no longer do so today. The field of religion has shrunk considerably as science and secularism have encroached upon its traditional domain. Darwin's theory of the evolution of life has made nonsense of the story of the Genesis propagated by the Judaic family of religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. No rational person today is willing to accept the story that God created the world in seven days, moulded Adam out of a clod of earth, Eve out of Adam's rib and the two between them sired the family of man. Nor does any rational, educated man accept the story of the Day of Judgement : that one day we will rise from our graves (or ashes) to answer for our deeds and be sent to heaven or hell for our deeds. Although, we who belong to the Hindu family of religions, in which I include Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism, believe that our theory of *Samsāra*—birth, death and rebirth in an unending cycle—is more plausible, the rational amongst us have to admit that there is no scientific evidence whatsoever to sustain it. The simple fact of the matter is that we do not know where we have come from, we do not know why we are here, or where we will go when we die. Adi Sankara put this pithily in a series of questions :

Kastwam ? Koham ? Kutah Ayatah ?

Ko me janani ? Ko me tatah ?

(Who am I ? Why am I here ? Where am I bound for ? Who are my real father and mother ?)

Shaad Azimabad put the same thing in simpler words :

Hikayat-i-hasti sunee to darmiyan se sunee
Na ibtida ki khabar hai, na intiha maaloom.

(What I heard of the story of life, I heard from the middle; I know not its beginning, I know not its end.)

Although we have discarded religious theories of the origin of life and the life hereafter, if there is one, men of science have not yet been able to probe into their mystery. Under the circumstances, the only honest answer a thinking person can give to the question that Adi Sankara posed is to admit: "I do not know where I have come from, I do not know why I am here, I do not know where I will go when I die."

An even more serious erosion of the field of religion has been caused by the establishment of the secular state. The State and not the Church has become the law-giver. It is not the Ten Commandments but the civil and penal codes which determine our relations with our fellow beings. Parliaments make laws; judges and magistrates interpret them; policemen and jailors see that they are enforced. This process has received a set-back with the revival of fundamentalism in certain parts of the world, notably Iran, some Arab States and Pakistan, but I am convinced that this revivalism is a passing phase. Religion can now only supplement what the States prescribe as rules of conduct of men dealing with one another. No matter what the Korān says or the Qadi's court decides, Muslim males will find it hard and harder to sanction one male taking four wives; Muslim women will refuse to veil themselves; no matter what the Shastras say or Manu prescribed, Hindu women will divorce husbands they do not like and remarry at will. Abortion, which most religions regarded as murder, is propagated for the health of the society; it has ceased to be regarded as a crime in most advanced countries, and homosexuality amongst consenting adults declared legitimate. This is the way the world is moving and there is little likelihood of the process being reversed.

We are left with only one activity which is and will remain exclusively the domain of religion, viz., man's relationship to himself, his conscience. Not knowing where he comes from,

not knowing why he is here, not knowing where he will go when he dies, all he has left for himself to decide is the best way he can spend the years allotted to him. Living as we do in a society where evil often triumphs over good, where wicked men prosper and enjoy good health while the good are ground to dust, live in poverty and sickness, makes us ponder and ask ourselves, why? Our minds are often disturbed by injustice perpetrated both by our creator as well as our fellow humans. We seek solace in prayer and worship, in meditating over what we see around us, in the hope that they may bring peace to our minds. Today every thinking man makes up his own personal religion, taking some ingredients from the religion into which he was born and reared, and adding to them others which answer to his needs in the times and society in which he happens to find himself. If you are in the process of formulating such a personal religion for yourself, allow me to present a few ideas of Mohammad Iqbal for your consideration.

Most people know of Allama Iqbal as the pre-eminent poet of the Urdu and Persian languages, a devout Muslim and one of the founding-fathers of Pakistan. All these have somewhat blurred the philosophic and prophetic aspects of his unique personality. Even scholars of Iqbal have done him injustice by concentrating only on his concept of *Khudi*, inadequately translated as self-hood. I do not accept much of Iqbal's religiosity nor his obsession with the past glories of Islam. But I have extracted from his writings much else which I believe is the product of his Kashmiri-Punjabi blood and summation of the Punjab's ethos. I have picked up five points of his teaching and incorporated them into the Sikhism into which I was born and nurtured. If I may concoct a horrible *khichdi* of a name for this religion, to which I subscribe, the closest I can get to is to describe it as Sikho-agnostic-Iqbalism. Here then are the five pillars (*arakan*) of Iqbalism that I present to you for your consideration.

First, do not accept any statement on faith, no matter what its source, but cultivate a scientific spirit of inquiry. Said Iqbal : "*Yaqeen kam kun, giriftar-i-Shak-i-bash.*" (Reduce the element of faith and learn to live in doubt.)

Second, which will follow as the day the night if you question every accepted principle, is to cultivate a rebellious spirit. Question or flout every tradition unless you are convinced of its correctness. Iqbal was a strong advocate of the restless mind; his favourite word was *talatum*—constant movement. For himself, he wished his mind to be like a field of poppies tossing wildly in the spring breeze : “*Dil na saboor danam cho saba lalah zare.*”

Iqbal's prayer or blessing for others was not of *!shanti* or peace of mind, but exposure to storm and adversity :

*Khuda tujhey kisee toofan se aashna kar de,
Ke tere bahar kee maujon me iztirab nahin.*

(May God bring a storm in your life, there are no ripples in the waves of your life's sea.)

If he had been living today, Iqbal would have been leading a movement against the present cult of yoga and meditation to induce peace of mind. To Iqbal any exercise devoted to stilling the mind would have been a criminal waste of time. He would have condemned peace of mind as a sterile concept productive of nothing but peace of mind. Pause and think : all the world's greatest poetry, prose, music, works of art, philosophy and scientific inventions were products of restless, agitated minds. Name me one person who through peace of mind has produced anything worthwhile. What is true of the individual is true of the community. The more active the community is, the faster it will progress; the more it gambles with fortune, the greater its destiny.

*Nishan yahee hai zamaney men zinda qaumon ka
Ke subh-c-shaam badaltee hain un kee taqdeeren.*

I need not labour this point very much except to draw your attention to yourselves. How is it that we Punjabis have virtually risen from the ashes to which the Partition reduced us, to become the most prosperous people of India ? Not through meditating on our fate but through ceaseless toil.

Iqbal made the spirit of creativity the primary function of religion :

*Har ke ud ra quwwat-i-takhleeq ne'st
Pesh ma juz kafir-o-zandeeg ne'est.*

(Anyone who does not have the faculty of creativity is to me nothing more than an unbeliever and an infidel.)

He believed that a man's aim in life should be to strive to make gifts given by God as humanly perfect as possible. This message he summed up in an audacious monologue he addressed to God :

*Too shab afridi, chiragh afreedam,
Saqaal afreedee, ayagh afreedam.
Biyabano-o-kohsar-o-ragh afreedee;
Khayaban-o-gulzar-o-bagh afreedam.
Man anam keh az sanq ayeena sazam;
Man anam keh az zahar nau sheenah sazam.*

Thou made the night, I the lamps to light it;
Thou made the day, I moulded it into a goblet.
Wild wastes, mountains and jungles were made by you;
I turned them into orchards, arbours and gardens.
It's I who ground stones and turned them into a mirror;
It's I who out of poison extracted poison's antidote.

Four, reactivate the concept that work is worship. But work not for personal gain but in the spirit of *nishkāma karma*, viz., striving to do your duty without expectation of reward. Iqbal believed that what came to a man by his own labour was *qasb-i-halal*—legitimate. What he acquired by inheritance or by a stroke of good luck was *harām*. You will recall that Guru Nanak also emphasized the work ethic : *Apni hatheen āpnā āpey hee kaaj savāriye*. Our Guru's exhortations to be the master of your own destiny are echoed in Iqbal's oft-quoted lines :

*Khudi ko kar buland itna, ke har taqdeer sey pehley
Khuda bandey se khud poochhey bata teri raza kya hai ?*

And finally, five, be fearless. Iqbal regarded fearlessness as the supreme virtue. The Gita had exhorted that once man is convinced of the righteousness of his cause he should put all he has in him for its vindication, regardless of consequences : "*Dukha sukhey same kritva, labh labhau, jaya jaya jayoo, Tato yudhay.*" The sentiment was repeated by Guru Tegh Bahadur in his description of the attributes of a man of faith : *Jo nar dukh men dukh nahin manai*. Likewise Iqbal exhorted

men to regard every setback in life and every calamity that befell him, as God's way of testing and purifying him :

Az balaa tarsee ? Hadith-i-Mustafa ast.

Mard ra roz-i-balaa rozi-safa ast.

(Are you scared of adversity ? It is the tradition of the Prophet. Regard the day of adversity as the day of Purification.) Man's life is full of challenges from which he shirks because of the fear of consequences, or compromises his conscience to avoid retribution. And of course man's greatest fear in life is the fear of death. To Iqbal the supreme test of courage was man's ability to face death with a smile :

Nishan-i-mard-i-momin {ba too goyam ?

Choon marg ayad tabassum bar lab-i-ost.

(You ask me the sign of a man of faith ? When death comes, he receives it with a smile on his lips.)

Individuals make a community. If there are enough individuals in a community imbued with these five qualities, that community is destined to greatness.

Afrad key hathon men hai qaum ki taqdeer

Har fard hai millat ki {muqaddar ka sitara.

Iqbal also believed that the stronger and the most abiding tie that {keeps a people together was the common bond of faith :

Fard quaim rabt-i-millat say hai

Tanha kuchh bhi {nahin;

Mauj hai darya men aur bairoon-i-darya

Kuch bhi nahin.

Ladies and gentlemen, that is all I have {to say. If my words have caused any disquiet {in your minds, if there is anyone whose sleep is disturbed by what I have said, I will know that my visit to Patiala was a success. Thank you.

December 3, 1981

KHUSHWANT SINGH

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